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The National Women's Health Information Center

A project of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health



## Frequently Asked Questions about Generalized Anxiety Disorder

### What is generalized anxiety disorder?

Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) is a real illness, called an *anxiety disorder*. It's not just simply worrying, and it can be treated to help a person have a healthy and full life. From time to time, we all have worries about our health, family, money, and work. But when a person has GAD, they worry all the time, even when nothing is wrong. A person with GAD always expects the worst will happen, can't relax, and feels tense most of the time. Aches and pains, plus feeling tired a lot, can also happen with GAD. Sometimes, though, the source of the worry is hard to pinpoint. Just the thought of getting through the day causes anxiety.

It's important to know that when a person has this illness, it's not her or his fault. And, it's not something a person can just "snap out of." No one knows for sure what causes GAD. Most often GAD begins in childhood, but can start in an adult as well. More women than men have this illness. And, GAD may run in families.

### What are the symptoms of GAD?

The biggest symptom of GAD is constant worry. Physical symptoms can also happen. Research suggests that GAD symptoms can become worse when a person is under stress. Symptoms include:

- Constant worrying about things both big and small.
- Aches and pains, including headaches, for no reason.
- Trembling and muscle tension.
- Feeling tense and unable to relax.
- Feeling tired all the time.
- Having trouble staying focused or not being able to keep your mind on one thing.
- Feeling irritable or grouchy.
- Trouble falling or staying asleep.
- Sweating or hot flashes.
- Having a lump in the throat or feeling like you need to throw up when you're worried.

Many people with GAD startle more easily than other people. They sometimes suffer from depression, too.

Most people with GAD have mild symptoms that don't limit them in regards to social settings or in the work place. Unlike other anxiety disorders, people don't usually avoid certain situations as a result of their disorder. But, GAD can be severe for some people, making it hard to do even the simplest daily tasks. The symptoms of GAD tend to lessen with age.

## What should I do if I think I have GAD?

If you think you may have symptoms of GAD, a visit to your doctor is the best place to start. Your doctor will perform a careful exam to figure out whether your symptoms are really due to GAD, or if you have another anxiety disorder or problem. Be aware that all anxiety disorders are not treated the same. GAD is diagnosed when someone spends at least 6 months worrying too much about everyday problems.

The next step your doctor may suggest is a visit with a mental health professional. This includes psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and counselors. It is best to look for a professional who has special training in cognitive-behavioral and/or behavioral therapy. Try to find someone who is open to the use of medications, should they be needed. And if they are not a medical doctor, be sure they work with one so medication can be prescribed. Keep in mind that when you start taking medicine, it may not start working right away. You need to give your body a few weeks to get used to the medicine. Then, you and your doctor can decide if it's working.

You can get free information about anxiety disorders from the National Institute of Mental Health. Call toll free 1-88-88-ANXIETY.

It's very important that you feel comfortable with your treatment. If this is not the case, seek help elsewhere. If you've been taking medication, don't stop it all of a sudden. These drugs need to be tapered off slowly, under the care of your doctor. Talk with your doctor about how to stop the medication you're taking.

## How is GAD treated?

Anxiety disorders are among the most common of all the mental disorders. Many people misunderstand these disorders and think people should be able to overcome the symptoms by sheer willpower. But, the symptoms can't be willed or wished away. There are treatments, developed through research, that work well for these disorders.

Anxiety disorders are treated in two ways – with medication and with certain types of psychotherapy (sometimes called “talk therapy”). Sometimes only one treatment is used or both treatments are combined. If you have an anxiety disorder, talk with your doctor about what will work best for you. If you do choose psychotherapy, make sure the therapist is able to provide you with medication, if needed.

A number of drugs used for treating depression, called *antidepressants*, have been found to help with anxiety disorders as well. *Monoamine oxidase inhibitors* (MAOIs) are used, along with the newer *selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors* (SSRIs). Other medicines include anti-anxiety drugs called *benzodiazepines* and *beta-blockers*.

Treatment with psychotherapy includes *cognitive-behavioral therapy* (CBT) and *behavioral therapy*. In CBT, the goal is to change how a person thinks about, and then reacts to, a situation that makes them anxious or fearful. In behavioral therapy, the focus is on changing how a person reacts to a situation. CBT or behavioral therapy most often lasts for 12 weeks. It can be group or individual therapy. With GAD, *biofeedback* (a type of behavioral therapy) can also be used to control muscle tension.

Keep in mind that it can be a challenge to find the right treatment for an anxiety disorder. But, if one treatment doesn't work, the odds are good that another one will. Your doctor and therapist will work together to help you find the best approach. New treatments are being developed through ongoing research. So, don't give up hope. If you have recovered from an anxiety disorder and it comes back at a later date, don't think that you've failed. You can be treated again. And, the skills you learned dealing with the disorder the first time can help you in coping with it again.

## **What can I do to help myself if I have GAD?**

Many people find it helps to join a support group because they can share their problems and successes with others who are going through the same thing. While it doesn't take the place of mental health care, talking with trusted friends or a member of your faith community can also be very helpful. Family members can play an important role in a person's treatment by offering support. Learning how to manage stress will help you to stay calm and focused. Research suggests that aerobic exercise (like jogging, bicycling and swimming) may be of value as well. Other studies have found that caffeine, illegal drugs, and some over-the-counter cold medicines can worsen the symptoms of these disorders. Check with your doctor or pharmacist before taking any over-the-counter medicines.

## **What is the latest research on anxiety disorders?**

The National Institute of Mental Health supports research into the causes, prevention, and treatment of anxiety disorders and other mental illnesses. Studies are ongoing for how family background (genetics) and life experience puts a person at risk for these disorders. New drugs are being tested in clinical trials, as well as therapy approaches. For information on clinical trials, go to the NIMH web site <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/studies/index.cfm> and the National Library of Medicine's clinical trials database at <http://www.clinicaltrials.gov>.

This FAQ was adapted from anxiety disorder fact sheets of the National Institute of Mental Health.

## For more information...

You can find out more about GAD and anxiety disorders, and their treatments by contacting the National Women's Health Information Center at (800) 994-9662 or the following organizations:

### **National Institute of Mental Health**

Phone Number(s): (301) 443-4513 or (301) 443-8431

Internet Address: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov>

### **Anxiety Disorder Education Program**

Phone Number(s): (800) 647-2642 or (888) 826-9438

Internet Address: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/anxiety/index.htm>

### **National Mental Health Information Center, SAMHSA, HHS**

Phone Number(s): (800) 789-2647

Internet Address: <http://www.mentalhealth.org>

### **National Mental Health Consumers' Self-Help Clearinghouse**

Phone Number(s): (800) 553-4539

Internet Address: <http://www.mhselfhelp.org>

### **National Mental Health Association**

Phone Number(s): (800) 969-6642

Internet Address: <http://www.nmha.org>

### **Anxiety Disorders Association of America**

Phone Number(s): (301) 231-9350

Internet Address: <http://www.adaa.org>

### **National Alliance for the Mentally Ill**

Phone Number(s): (800) 950-6264

Internet Address: <http://www.nami.org>

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*This FAQ was reviewed by Victoria Hendrick, M.D., of the University of California, Los Angeles.  
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